



DESIGN MATTERS

WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS DONE

ADDING COLLEGE-COURSE COMPLETION TO K-12 ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

A POLICY BRIEF

BY DIANE WARD AND JOEL VARGAS

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



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College and career readiness for all high school graduates: This is the new consensus standard for educational excellence, and more and more states are revising their accountability systems to include metrics that advance this goal of high performance. The federal government's recent invitation to states to request waivers from provisions of the No Child Left Behind Law may further provide states with an opportunity to redesign their accountability systems and encourage district and school initiatives to help ensure that high school graduates are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.

This brief proposes that including college-course completion as a measure in K-12 accountability frameworks is a robust strategy for driving educational improvement. An increasing number of states are including this predictive indicator of college success in their accounting of high school performance.

States have embraced college and career readiness as a goal, as exemplified by the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards and other rigorous state-level standards, assessments, and graduation requirements that better align secondary and postsecondary expectations.¹ In so doing, states have laid a foundation for ensuring that more students start college prepared for college-level work. However, this is no guarantee that they will reach the finish line: a postsecondary degree or credential, which is crucial to entering a career that provides family-sustaining wages. Upwards of 22 percent of the most highly prepared high school graduates who enroll in college still do not obtain a degree. The rate of not obtaining a degree is far higher—44 percent—for the most highly prepared *low-income* students (Goldberger 2007).²

What more can states do to build an educational pipeline that ensures all students—especially low-income, minority, and first-generation college students—are primed for postsecondary success?

WHY FOCUS ON COLLEGE-COURSE TAKING IN HIGH SCHOOL

Creating opportunities for underserved youth to earn transferable college credits as part of the high school experience, without paying college tuition, is an effective way to ensure their readiness for college and careers (Hoffman & Vargas 2010). This strategy provides students with a powerful head start and academic momentum toward completing a postsecondary degree or credential.

This policy brief draws on Jobs for the Future's extensive work helping states develop and promote sound policies and practice that create stronger pathways from high school to and through college for low-income, minority, and first-generation students.

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As a growing body of research shows, education pathways that blend high school and college, such as early college high schools and comprehensive dual enrollment programs, are a promising college-readiness strategy.³ Such pathways address multiple competencies needed for success in college—not only academic preparation but also other types of “college knowledge” skills that are honed most authentically in actual college courses. These skills include, for example: self-management of study routines and preparation for assessments; handling the pace and expectations of college courses; the strategic use of resources such as professors’ office hours and peer-to-peer study groups; and the understanding of discipline-specific norms for creating and communicating knowledge (Conley 2010).

However, low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and youth from families with no previous college-going history often lack the information and guidance needed to access and navigate college. College in the high school can help prepare these students to become truly college and career ready.

COLLEGE-COURSE COMPLETION IS AN EFFECTIVE COLLEGE-READINESS STRATEGY

College courses coupled with sustained supports motivate students, especially low-income students, to accelerate their learning. The successful completion of meaningful college courses is a strong signal of college readiness. Research suggests that dual enrollment participants show more signs of college success than non-participants from otherwise similar backgrounds, and the benefits appear to be greater for students typically underrepresented in college (Karp et al. 2007).⁴ These indicators include:

- Higher college enrollment;
- Higher college persistence through the second year; and
- Higher college grade point averages through the second year.

In early college schools, which build on dual enrollment by providing an on ramp to college for underserved young people, students often earn one to two years of transferable college credit along with their high school diploma. Nearly 25 percent of early college students earn an Associate’s degree by high school graduation (Webb & Mayka 2011). In effect, these young people are already “college students” by the time they graduate from high school. As one researcher found in interviews with graduates from early college schools, students graduated high school not merely *believing* they were prepared for college but *knowing* they were prepared, having completed rigorous college courses (Nakkula 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

Integrated, longitudinal K-16 data systems enable states to track the performance of students as never before. However, drawing on information from JFF’s 50-state database of dual enrollment programs, as well as additional data from Achieve, Inc. and the College Board, we found that:

- Most states provide opportunities for high school students to take college courses for credit through dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate; but
- Few states have instituted reporting requirements on the progress of students who take advantage of these options.⁵

Including such reporting in state accountability systems would encourage schools to prepare more students for success in college. It also would signal the importance not just of getting to the “water’s edge” of college readiness but also of gaining the academic and non-academic momentum that increases the likelihood of college success. Schools would have incentives to create supportive pathways that embed college knowledge in the K-12 curriculum by integrating college courses into the high school course of study.

Several states are adapting their accountability frameworks to incorporate measures of college-level course completion



by high school students. These states are taking a variety of approaches to accounting and providing incentives for higher performance (see page 4 for examples from six states). Although relatively new, few in number, and still developing, these policies offer building blocks that can lend guidance to other states and reveal ways to enhance this kind of accountability policy.

Based on the work of pioneering states in this area, we recommend the following:

Performance Goals

States that set goals for raising college-course completion by high school students send a signal to school leaders about public priorities for improving college and career readiness.

IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO EMPHASIZE AMBITIOUS GOALS FOR LOW-INCOME AND OTHER STUDENT GROUPS UNDERREPRESENTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION. These groups particularly benefit from strategies that increase their college-course taking in high school (Karp et al. 2007; AIR & SRI 2009). Setting high goals for schools serving these students makes it clear that such pathways are not just a reward for “gifted” and already “accelerated” students but also a route to college readiness for a broad segment of the high school population.

Tracking and Reporting

States should require that districts track the participation and success of students who earn college credit in high school. It is essential that these systems:

- **REQUIRE HIGH SCHOOLS AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS TO DISAGGREGATE DATA BY INCOME AND RACE/ETHNICITY.** This highlights the performance of typically underserved students and the schools serving them. It also makes it easier to assess the impact of college-course taking on high school completion, college enrollment, and college persistence.
- **COUNT ALL COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES COMPLETED SATISFACTORILY IN HIGH SCHOOL—DUAL ENROLLMENT, ADVANCED PLACEMENT, INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE—BUT**

DISTINGUISH AMONG THOSE OPTIONS IN THE REPORTING.

Dual enrollment, AP, and IB courses are complementary college-course options that can improve college readiness, but each takes different approaches (e.g., on crediting, exams). It is important to monitor the effects of each option separately.

Recognition for Schools and Districts

Although data tracking and reporting acknowledge improved performance, states may want to offer additional incentives to schools and districts through special recognition or other rewards for meeting goals or showing improvement on measures of college-course completion.

ENHANCED INCENTIVES SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED FOR SCHOOLS THAT SHOW SUCCESS IN HELPING UNDERSERVED STUDENTS TO COMPLETE COLLEGE COURSES. This can raise the visibility of successful strategies and encourage their adoption more widely. For example, recognition should be given to schools that create strong pathways to college courses for low-income students or pathways that show success at putting over-aged, under-credited students back on track to high school graduation and college success.

THE POTENTIAL OF SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

What gets measured is what gets done. In an era when college and career readiness is becoming the prime directive for high schools, college-course completion is an indicator that should be integral to state accountability systems and other policies—especially because of the college knowledge that such courses provide to low-income and underrepresented students. A number of states have instituted policies and can lead the way. However, existing state policies could be improved as well—in particular, by paying more explicit attention to tracking and rewarding college-course completion in schools serving underrepresented groups.



That said, this paper addresses only one side of a two-sided coin: the role of K-12 accountability policy in encouraging secondary schools to increase the college readiness and success of their graduates. Yet higher education institutions and postsecondary policies have an equally important role to play in creating and encouraging pathways that put their future students on a path to success. Thus, we also urge states to develop mechanisms that reward colleges for the first-year college performance of low-income students and other underrepresented groups, including their performance as indicated by the completion of key first-year college courses while they are in high school.

Early college schools and dual enrollment pathways not only promote first-year college success; they also create school-college partnerships that provide a model for promoting shared responsibility and tighter linkages between the K-12 and postsecondary systems. These grounded, focused partnerships are proving to be effective vehicles for enhancing the college readiness and success of students who are often lost in the transition between the two systems. Rewarding institutions in both systems would encourage the creation of more of these pathways, which would increase the number of students who enroll and succeed in college.

STATE POLICIES FOR REPORTING AND REWARDING COLLEGE-COURSE TAKING IN HIGH SCHOOL

FLORIDA	One component for grading high schools is accelerated coursework participation for students in grades 9-12, based on exams taken for AP, IB, The Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education Diploma (AICE), and industry certification, as well as earning a grade of C or higher in dual enrollment courses.
GEORGIA	Education leaders seek to move beyond standardized test scores as the sole measurement of student success. In an interview with the <i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> , State School Superintendent John Barge said Georgia is seeking a waiver from federal No Child Left Behind Act requirements that would permit the state to include indicators of college and career readiness such as student performance in dual enrollment classes, where students earn high school and college credit, in its accountability formula. ⁶
INDIANA	A proposed high school accountability framework to be voted on by the State Board of Education in October 2011 would include college/career attainment as measured by AP/IB exam scores, attainment of college credit, and industry certification.
NEW MEXICO	A new school-rating system assigns a letter grade to each school based on several academic indicators, including participation in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate courses, and dual enrollment courses.
OKLAHOMA	The Academic Performance Index, which Oklahoma uses to measure student and school performance, includes an indicator on student participation in AP courses. If available, these data are disaggregated by socioeconomic status and ethnic group.
TEXAS	The Gold Performance Acknowledgment (GPA) system recognizes districts and campuses that perform well on indicators other than those used to determine accountability ratings. These indicators recognize AP/IB results and the completion of dual enrollment courses.



ENDNOTES

¹ The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have signed on to the standards. See: <http://www.corestandards.org>.

² Based on analysis by Goldberger (2007) of the National Education Longitudinal Study.

³ Dual enrollment enables students to enroll in and earn credit for college-level coursework while still in high school.

⁴ See also Swanson (2008); Klopfenstein (2010); and Michalowski (2007).

⁵ See: Achieve, Inc. (2001).

⁶ See: <http://www.ajc.com/news/georgia-politics-elections/state-appeals-no-child-1184661.html>.

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DESIGN MATTERS

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